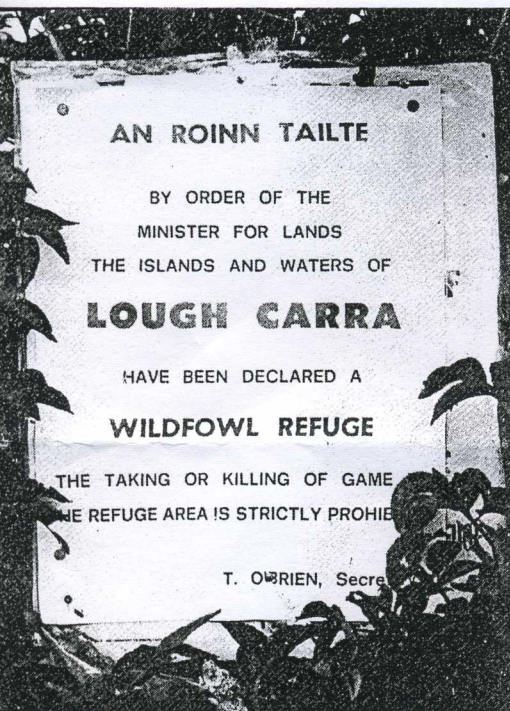


Duck traps are visited daily.

Lough Carra has recently been declared a reserve.



WILDFOWL ON LOUGH CARRA

by Jeffery Harrison

Lough Carra in Co. Mayo, Eire, apart from being one of the most beautiful loughs in all Eire—some would say the most beautiful of all—will soon be no less famous for the wildfowl research being carried out there.

Lough Carra has recently been declared a Wildfowl Refuge. It has the largest concentration of nesting mallard anywhere in the Republic—that is why Brian Stronach chose this lough as the site for his studies when he began his wildfowl research following his appointment by the Ministry of Lands just over two years ago, prior to which he had been a game warden in East Africa.

During this time, regular wildfowl counts have been carried out, weekly in winter, every two weeks in summer. This is no mean undertaking as we were to discover, for the lough is eight miles long and covers over 4,000 acres. The count involves travelling some 24 miles in an open boat and takes almost five hours. Fortunately Brian has two real enthusiasts as his assistants, Tommy Flanelly and Joe Conroy, each an expert wildfowler and fisherman from boyhood—and what better upbringing can there be for wildfowl conservation?

Peak duck counts on the lough so far have been as follows: mallard, 1,600; teal, 880; pochard, 700; tufted duck, 550; widgeon, 125; shoveler, 100; goldeneye, 100; gadwall, 45. Both greylags and Greenland white-fronted geese roost on the water.

The breeding population of the Lough is very accurately plotted and consists of some 150 pairs of mallard, 50 pairs of tufted, 10 pairs of teal and 20 pairs of red-breasted mergansers.

What makes this reserve particularly interesting is that virtually the whole of this population breeds on the islands of

which there are over 60 in all, mostly with plenty of nesting cover from bushes and trees. Some indeed may have too much cover, but Brian's studies will in time reveal the ideal type of island, which will enable them and the thousands of other islands in the Irish loughs to be properly managed for nesting wildfowl.

The reason why the islands on Carra are so favoured by nesting duck is probably the result of pressure from ground predators ashore, which is to say foxes and feral cats. Now, on the islands, only otters remain as a ground predator and they do little damage. The same of course applies ashore to the very rare pine marten.

The major predator is the hooded crow. In the wonderful summer of 1968, the breeding success rate was only 38 per cent

Tommy (left) and Joe recording a mallard's weight.



Illustrated by Pamela Harrison

of the mallard, so in February 1969, a major offensive against the crows was started, using alphachloralose in hens' eggs—and at least 60 were known to have been destroyed in this way. One most elusive pair were finally destroyed when their own eggs, by then well set, were broken open and baited. The crows then proceeded to eat their own young in their own nest!

As a result of this great effort, which involved using 1,000 hens' eggs, the breeding success in the far less favourable summer of 1969 is known to have increased remarkably to 70.6 per cent. A number of deserted crows' nests were subsequently used by mallard and as a result of greatly diminished crow predation, there were far fewer late broods.

This is a most encouraging result from the first year of intensive crow control, but, of course, the experiment will be continued for a number of years yet before it can be fully assessed.

All the nests are followed through and Brian uses his springer spaniels not only to find the nests but also to catch and ring the sitting bird. Needless to say, this is a task only for the real expert with an utterly reliable dog. In all, 45 duck mallard have now been ringed in this way without any trouble.

Abberton type cage traps are used to catch other duck on the lough during the autumn and winter. The annual catch of mallard is about 250, the majority being caught in August and September. These birds are all ringed, so Lough Carra is therefore one of the very few places where home-bred mallard are being caught and ringed in significant numbers in either Great Britain or Ireland and this particularly applies to the young birds. WAGBI is delighted to be able to play some small part in this work, for all the rings being used are supplied through WAGBI, which also receives and passes on the recoveries.

Apart from mallard, a number of tufted duck, teal and mergansers are also being ringed on the lough, but pride of place must go to the drake American green-winged teal which was caught and ringed last winter.

Orange wing tabs are also being used to facilitate local observations. These are most effective, being easily seen through glasses at ranges up to 500 yards.

The recoveries from this intensive ringing programme are still in a very early stage, but already they are proving of much interest. The recovery rate of about 20 per cent is considerably higher than that for WAGBI hand-reared mallard released on to reserves and already there seems to be a definite south-easterly trend away from the lough, culminating in a recovery from Brittany in France.

Typical duck nesting island on Lough Carra.

Brian Stronach, in charge of the wildfowl research at Lough Carra.



Releasing a mallard after ringing.

No hand-reared mallard are being released on Lough Carra, where the study is solely on the wild population. Brian is, however, running two trial release experiments in conjunction with the WAGBI scheme, one at Port Leash, near Dublin, the other in Donegal. As if this was not enough, he is full of ideas for the conservation of snipe and woodcock.

Without doubt, we are going to hear a great deal more about Lough Carra and the really splendid work being carried out there.

